DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 392 037 CS 214 930

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TITLE ...And Justice for All. Occasional Paper No. 41.
INSTITUTION National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy, Berkeley, CA.; National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy, Pittsburgh, PA.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Jun 95
CONTRACT R117G10036
NOTE 28p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; *Classroom Communication; *Controversial Issues (Course Content); Grade 8; Junior High Schools; Literature Appreciation; Middle Schools; *Multicultural Education; *Racial Attitudes; *Racial Relations; *Student Attitudes; Teacher Student Relationship; Teaching Styles; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Response to Literature

ABSTRACT

A Puerto Rican teacher of an eighth grade consisting of 33 students (19 girls and 14 boys) at a racially-mixed public middle school found that teaching students about race and gender is a risky venture. The median age of the students was 13.8. The racial demographics were as follows: 45% African-American, 31% Euro-American, 18% Latino, 3% Asian-American, and 3% of East Indian heritage. The class started by reading "To Kill a Mocking Bird" together, a text that explicitly engages issues of race. In reading the book, members of the class began to engage one another on issues of race, leading to very heated debates, arguments, conflicts and, in one case, physical violence. Later, a discussion in which students were asked to share their own personal experiences of prejudice and discrimination, racial and otherwise, led to some healing of the wounds opened during earlier discussions. The class also read "Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry," a novel that takes place in the south at about the same time as "To Kill a Mocking Bird," but is written from the perspective of a young Black. During discussion of this novel, the class bonded momentarily with one another while sharing common experiences of persecution or criticism for attending a racially mixed school. In the end, the question arose of whether or not it was worthwhile to engage in discussions on racial issues. The conclusion was that it was doubtful that a teacher could truly affect the lives of students by reciting pre-rehearsed lines on a make-believe stage and remain in blissful ignorance. (TB)

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The publication of this report was supported under the Educational Research and Development Center Program (R117G10036 for the National Center for the Study of Writing) as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. The findings and opinions expressed in this report do not reflect the position or policies of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement or the U.S. Department of Education.

This publication was produced on an Apple Macintosh IIsi computer with portrait display monitor and an Apple LaserWriter IIntx printer donated to the National Center for the Study of Writing by Apple Computer, Inc.

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... And Justice for All

Griselle M. Diaz-Gemmati
Chicago, Illinois

I was beginning my tenth year as an educator. I smiled as I remembered entering this school for the first time; my very first teaching assignment. I recalled my apprehension. A Latina teacher in an Anglo neighborhood, hired to teach a handful of bussed kids in a Spanish bilingual program that spanned grades one through eight. The school's community was the last affluent White neighborhood within the city limits. It is a place that borders the suburbs, looks like the suburbs, but gives the city's police and firefighters the job's required city address. I was insecure and inexperienced, but determined.

Often I overlooked the non-existent and sometimes inadequate materials, the makeshift classroom, and the school clerk's bigoted rudeness. Resourcefulness soon replaced my fears. My bilingual program became a working reality of a multi-age, student-directed curriculum.

I dreaded when my kids left my safe classroom and entered the mainstream student population; it was then that I saw the old look of apprehension and fear rekindled in their eyes. I taught them how to stand, but I could not follow through to watch them run.

Three years after I first walked into the school, I told the principal I would be interested in the newly vacated eighth grade teaching position. Once he agreed to place me in a regular classroom, the old feelings of uneasiness assaulted me once more. What would the community think? What would they say about a Latina teacher taking over the eighth grade class? In a "regular" classroom? Surprisingly, it was not the community that had misgivings about my ability, but my own faculty, the people I considered my colleagues. They were a group of very traditional Anglo teachers who had about one hundred years of teaching experience among them. Some were

bold enough to ask me outright if I was qualified to teach typical subjects in a genuine classroom.

My apprehension developed into a passion for success. Their trepidation became my motivation. That was six years, twelve teachers, and three principals ago. Again I had withstood challenge and did not fail.

I was awakened from my ruminations by my eighth graders sauntering into the classroom. Although it was the second day of the new school year, I knew each of them well. I was their seventh grade teacher last year. My new principal and I were concerned about this group. We knew they had been subjected to a parade of teachers during their fifth and sixth grades. They were not cooperative; they lacked motivation, and they took no initiative. We decided that I should follow them for two years to see what impact, if any, I could have on them academically and emotionally. Our risk paid off. This class was becoming a cohesive group of adolescents who were well liked by the entire faculty. I had grown very attached to them and was glad that my opportunity to embark on a research project included this particular group.

I began my research by asking a specific, and I thought non-controversial, question: What happens when adolescent students begin to explore the themes of racism and prejudice as they discuss and write about literature? Expressly, can they separate how they feel from what they have heard from their family, friends and communities?

Before I relate our story, I would like to share some background information about my kids. My class consisted of 33 students—nineteen girls and fourteen boys. Of these, 21 were bussed from inner city schools. The class's median age was 13.8. The racial demographics of my group were as follows: 45% African-American, 31% Euro-American, 18% Latino, 3% Asian-American, and 3% of East Indian heritage. Nine percent of the students in my classroom are of racially mixed parentage. The class's reading abilities, according to their latest standardized test scores, ranged from the latter part of fourth grade to the beginning of eleventh grade.

My class is part of a unique school of 260 students, with one grade per class and one class per grade. It is a microcosm of the idealistically integrated community of the future. Our realm encompasses students in a beautiful blend of colors and cultures. Our school population also includes a small number of special education and physically challenged students. We are an urban school set in an open nine-acre campus on the northwest edge of the

city. Our bussed children, about 48% of the school population, love the sprawling grass playgrounds where softball, soccer, football and basketball games are played simultaneously. The setting contrasts sharply with the black-topped, gang-riddled, fenced-in playgrounds of some of their inner-city home schools. They enjoy the opportunity to play with their schoolmates on self-chosen teams during the 15-minute morning recess or the daily 45-minute lunch break.

We are the only one of three neighborhood public schools in this northwest area of the city that is truly, and according to federal law, desegregated. The immediate neighborhood at first did not look at our integration with favor. Yet our nine acres were our sheltered zone, our paradise. It seemed to work. The kids were getting along. Their fights seemed to be minor rumblings of dubiously scored points, ignored rules or rowdy games of "Johnny Tackle" rather than directed racial instances.

Being the eighth grade teacher, I relish the task of putting the finishing touches on all who graduate from our school. I try to assure my students that their final year of elementary school will not only be enlightening and challenging, but memorable. It's a teacher's utopia. I consider it an advantage to be able to work with all these ethnically diverse children from varying socioeconomic levels, where different children are brought together in one place to work, study, play, and coexist for their grammar school years.

I embarked on my journey of teacher researcher with a single vision focus. I wanted to showcase my kids—a group of 33 fabulous adolescents who had responded enthusiastically to a literature-based, student-directed curriculum. Before me, I had all the ingredients of a thousand success stories. I initiated my research certain that it was going to be effortless. I actually believed that all I would need to do was state what I thought was the obvious. I held fast to the belief that all children can overlook their physical, ethnic, and cultural differences, if all the conditions for learning are just so. I truly believed that if they are provided with a nonpartisan, caring, and safe environment anything is possible. As I look back to the beginning of my study I wonder, was this my reality, or was it all an illusion?

The rude awakening that my students and I experienced as a result of my research caused havoc in our classroom, on our playground, in our homes, in our communities. I find it difficult and agonizing to talk about our transition. Truthfully, the mere thought of committing the story of our realization to

paper leaves me raw and emotionally depleted. I could not begin to narrate our experience without first admitting to feeling like an imbecile. How could I not have detected the snags in this magical, imaginary fabric I had woven? What was I thinking? Seeing? Ignoring?

I'll begin by providing some background information about how my classes work. First, to establish a student-directed reading environment, I organize an individualized literature program. All students are responsible for selecting their own novels, keeping a log of what they have read, and a journal in which they react to and critique what they are reading. They also are responsible for reporting their reading progress to the members of their literature group. Because our school offers its teachers a restructured day, I can provide a daily 20- to 25-minute sustained silent reading time. We have a reading rug where students can sit or lie down on throw pillows they have brought from home, as they read silently. I want them to get comfortable and relaxed when they read. I believe that this atmosphere fosters a pleasant and inviting attitude toward what the students once believed was a tedious task.

Literature discussions usually take place two to three times a week. The literature groups consist of five to seven members of varying reading abilities. I make sure the members of each particular literature circle contain both boys and girls from different ethnic groups, with varied reading skills and interests. Sometimes I choose their groups and sometimes I help them with their choice. Each circle is responsible for selecting a scribe and a leader. The scribe records in the group's journal what each of the members is reading and group members' particular reactions to each piece of literature. The leader prompts each member to talk about different literary aspects of the book, such as character analysis, setting, plot, etc.

The literature leader keeps everyone to a specific time limit, usually no more than three to five minutes, and briefs the entire class on the discussions that have taken place in his or her meeting. Responsibilities are shifted every two weeks or so to assure that everyone gets an opportunity to be a leader and a scribe. Since five literature circles meet at once, I go from one to the next as an observer and as a member, not as a supervisor. I really get a charge from listening to my students discuss literature from different perspectives and watching them attempt to substantiate their opinions from passages in their novels. I speak about what I happen to be reading and relate my reactions to

the author's writing. Students feel empowered by the ability to choose what they read, and there is no "grouping" of children according to capability.

Once the independent reading workshop becomes an accomplished part of our daily routine, I initiate class novels into the program. The concept is the same as for independent reading, except that now everyone reads the same novel. Reading the same novel helps us build a close intellectual community as we share common intellectual experiences. We get to know and discuss characters we all are familiar with; we interpret the same dialogues together; we discuss the structure of a commonly known plot. I still assign independent reading as a homework task. The record-keeping for both readings remains entirely the responsibility of the individual student.

To assist the students with the choice of a class novel, I present them with a list of prospective paperbacks on the same general theme. I also present a brief synopsis of each of the suggested titles. The novel is then selected by a majority vote. Usually they go with something I recommend, but there are times when they negotiate with me to select a book they've heard about that isn't on my list.

To understand what happens when adolescent students explore themes of racism and prejudice as they discuss and write about literature, I wanted my class to read two novels, both dealing with racial prejudice, but from different perspectives. I initiated a strong campaign to kindle specific interest in *To Kill A Mockingbird*. I had read the novel years before and was haunted for weeks by its poignancy. Scout, the main character and narrator, was a prepubescent girl who was not afraid to speak her mind. Her relationship with her father was unique. At several junctures in the novel, Scout flagrantly opposes her father's opinions. Scout is one of two children in a one-parent family, something I felt many of my students could relate to. I was also intrigued by the subtle understanding that the nucleus and mother figure in this White family was their Black maid, Calpurnia.

I romanced the children by announcing to the class, "There's this novel I've read about a man who gets accused of rape. At his trial, all evidence points to his innocence. It becomes increasingly obvious to the reader that this accused man is physically incapable of committing this horrendous act of violence."

"What happens to him?" asks Nick.

"Well," I answer, "I'd rather you read the book to find out."

The class emits a mixture of moans and chuckles.

"Mrs. Gemmati!" smiles Melissa, "Why do you do us like that? O.K. I'm curious, where's this book?"

After two years with the same group, I felt I had a good understanding of their group dynamics. Still, I did not want the class to feel as if they were forced into reading the novel, so I had an alternate plan. Had I felt strong resistance from the class or any group of students in the class, I planned to organize a group of interested students to read the novel and derive my research data from their responses and reactions. I knew that the ideal situation was to have the entire class participate, but I would not have compromised my integrity or risked the students' trust in our classroom policies. Happily, though, the whole group was eager to begin with *To Kill a Mockingbird*. After the paperbacks were passed out, I let the kids skim through them for a while. I encouraged them to read the back cover. Some asked me questions about the time in history when this story takes place. We talked informally about the South, especially after the Civil War. We discussed what type of bird a mockingbird is. We reviewed our general knowledge about Alabama.

I deliberately focused at first on injustice rather than racial prejudice. I wanted my students to arrive, if they ever did, at the topic of racism by themselves.

After the initial reading assignments the group's enthusiasm to read *To Kill A Mockingbird* varied. Some were hesitant to start such a "fat" book; others waded through its heavy metaphoric descriptions as if trying to sprint through water, but ultimately, the animated discussions that started coming from the literature circles were worth my initial apprehension.

Initially everyone was on equal footing. We explained the descriptions of the town to each other. Some of the metaphors Lee uses were taken quite literally by some students. When we discussed the description "tired old town," I was amused to discover that some children envisioned a town of elderly people.

Then something altered the discussions. I happen to be sitting in on a circle discussion when a major disagreement erupted. The word "Nigger" offended the White students in the circle much more than the Blacks. Shelly, a bright White girl brought this point up in the discussion. In not so many words, Shelly let her circle know that it was one of those words everyone

knew, but did not use. Nancy, an equally smart Black girl and a strong rival for the top of the class's pecking order, resented Shelly's taking offense.

"I don't see what your problem is," she sarcastically responded to Shelly. "No one ever called you guys nothing but 'Master'."

Shelly insisted, "Doesn't it bother you to see that vulgarity in print?"

"No, why should it?" retorted Nancy. "We know where we come from."

At this point I asked Nancy if she or people she knew addressed each other by the term "nigger" and how she felt about it.

"It don't bother us, we know we mean no harm by it."

"Then why does it tick you off when I get offended by it?" Shelly persisted.

"It takes on a different meaning coming from you," Nancy snapped.

I was perplexed. I felt it was one of those things that many people wondered about, yet never vocalized for fear of being misinterpreted. Shelly did not possess the inhibition I felt.

I asked Nancy to explain why. She thought for a moment and replied, "Mrs. Gemmati, it's like different. If my mama is complaining about her boyfriend and calls him an ass, that's O.K. But if I call him an ass, she gets all over me. It's like that."

Still, Shelly refused to give ground. "It's like using a swear word."

"It depends who's doing the swearing!" Nancy shot back.

The battle lines were drawn. Others joined the fray. Soon the entire group was talking at one another rather than talking to each other. The rest of the discussion volleyed back and forth around the conjecture that the word "Nigger" was a White man's way of ensuring the imposed lower status of the Black man. It also touched upon how some Blacks refer to each other as "Nigger" without offense because they know where they come from and share some common ground. I sat back dumbfounded. Being neither Black nor White, I felt inept at defusing the mounting tension. Yet I knew exactly what Nancy was talking about. I too used nuances with relatives and close friends that would take on an abrasive tone if used by someone other than a Puerto Rican.

The bell reverberated in the hallway, but no one paid attention to it. The discussion was becoming a heated argument. I felt I had to intervene. I knew the issue was unresolved, but there was no getting them past this one point without appearing to side with one person or the other. I uneasily shooed them out to recess. A heavy tension lingered in the room for the rest of the

morning. The final entry in my journal that day was, "God, what have I gotten us into?"

My drive home felt unusually long that evening. The discussion from Nancy and Shelly's literature circle was on constant replay in my mind. There was no drowning it out. My resolve to do something about it was overwhelming. A strong part of my personality consists of being non-confrontational. This was certainly uncomfortable territory. I didn't enjoy finding myself in this predicament. I wanted to discuss my situation with someone. I thought of my colleagues and was apprehensive about their reactions. After quite a bit of deliberation, I decided to keep the incident to myself.

I arrived at school early the next morning. The previous night's fitful sleep did nothing to enhance my usual grouchy morning disposition. I listened to my voice making the morning announcements. It sounded terse. The students seemed edgy. Was I imagining this tension, or was it really still there?

The morning's opening activities went on as usual. Larry collected the lunch orders, Maria passed out journals, José took attendance, Freddy watered the plants, Shelly vacuumed the reading rug. The rest of the students talked among themselves as is their custom. Eventually, when the chores were done, we quieted down to start writing in our personal journals. I attempted twice to write in my journal. Nothing came. The stark white page dared me to write about my inner turmoil. I couldn't. I said a silent prayer and stood up to start the class.

"Today I'd like you to help me do a word cluster." The exercise was not new to the class. I often use this procedure to introduce new vocabulary words. I find it often helps the kids understand words or phrases in context and individually. The students' stirrings told me that they were fishing in their desks for their thesauruses and/or dictionaries. "Put them away," I announced over my shoulder as I turned toward the blackboard, "You'll only need your honest opinions and beliefs for this cluster." I printed the word "stereotype" on the board. The class sat strangely still for a few moments. The members of Nancy and Shelly's literature group silently stared at the word, Other hands around them shot up.

"A belief about something."

"A notion."

"A judgment."

The chalk in my hand tap-danced as I hurriedly wrote their responses on the blackboard.

"Is a stereotype good or bad?" I prompted.

"Bad!" was their chorused reply.

"Why?" I attempted to look directly at each of them as I spoke.

"Because," Nancy spoke for the first time that morning, "it's like saying all blondes are dumb." Shelly's head shot up and her icy blue glare bore into Nancy's face.

Fearing a repeat of yesterday's heated discussion, I quickly wrote the word "prejudice" next to our first cluster.

"O.K., now let's cluster this word." Did my voice sound as tense as I felt?

"White."

"Black."

"Hispanic."

"Hindu."

"Chinese."

Again I hurriedly wrote on the board. After a moment, I stood still, with my back toward the class. I ignored the names of the other ethnic groups that were shouted out. Ultimately, the room settled into an uneasy silence.

"What," I asked still facing the blackboard, "do any of these ethnic groups have to do with the meaning of the word 'prejudice'?" I slowly turned to face a group of kids I thought I knew.

"Blacks hate Whites."

"Whites hate everyone," someone abruptly countered.

"The word in question is not hate!" I snapped harshly. Again I tried to look directly into each of their faces. The strained tone of my voice did not elicit any other comments or responses. I felt they had plenty to say, yet I knew that the general tone of their answers was not conducive to a productive discussion.

Thinking I might be able to diffuse some of the tension by stopping the whole class discussion, I said automatically, "Get in your literature circles, and cluster the word prejudice with your groups." Divide and conquer. Was that what I wanted to do?

As was my usual practice for my teacher research, when students worked in groups, I went around to each group to set up tape recorders. The last thing

I wanted to do was interfere or disrupt their discussions. I did not want my presence to infuse their answers with whatever responses they'd think I would want. As I later listened to the tapes of their circle discussions I felt like an intruder. I felt as if I were eavesdropping on something confidential, something personal.

Their discussions that morning bounced back and forth for nearly half an hour. I asked each group to instruct its scribe on precisely what the members wanted to report to the whole class. I hoped that this impromptu system of channeled reporting would harness some of the negative energy that threatened to ignite my classroom.

Issues on the prejudice of gender, age, religion, race, and roles surfaced in these class reports. In a fervent circle discussion, Allen, a Black student, made everyone realize a very important truth.

"Today's society," he reasoned, "makes us be prejudiced against each other." He stood up to emphasize his point when the others in the circle told him he was way off base.

"If you see a big guy," he directed his comments to the girls in his circle, "with a black, bulky leather jacket, face not shaved, funny looking eyes, earrings on, hands in his pockets, walking over in you direction when you on a street, and it's getting dark and you alone, don't tell me you ain't going to be scared. You going to imagine the worse, and you going to try to get out of his way. Right?"

The group did not respond.

"Hell," he continued, "even the cops say we should report stuff like that ... call if we see anybody suspicious. Who gets to define suspicious? Our prejudices!"

Not one person in the group countered Allen's argument. All knew he had a valid point.

For a while the scribes, holding true to our literature circle procedure, were successful at keeping personal attacks at bay. Although the intensity of the students' convictions ebbed slightly during our attempts at proper classroom etiquette, it burned just as profusely beneath the surface of our decaying facade.

In *To Kill A Mockingbird*, the town's attitude toward Blacks and those who helped Blacks sparked heated exchanges in literature circles. I tried to put everything in a historic perspective by having my students research the Jim

Crow practices. I also tried to explain the social, economic and moral climate of the South after the era of reconstruction. I by no means tried to assuage the feelings of frustration the class felt by realizing that these were the way things were not only regarded, but accepted. The class could not come to grips with the way the town's people treated each other with such flagrant disregard for human dignity.

Alas, common ground! Everyone agreed that the treatment of Blacks in the South during that period of history was deplorable. The minority students felt angry and vengeful. Their journals and their writings reflected one common underlying theme—pent up resentment. The White students felt defensive and their writings told me they were angered and confused about their feelings.

I convinced myself that if I prompted them to channel their energies into their reading logs and journals, I could help them deal with their anger. My strategy helped, as I watched their writings take on a new, sharper hue. Through their writings they exposed themselves to me in a way that was personal, sad and confidential. They became as individual as snowflakes. They shared dismal chunks of their lives via the silent monologue of their pens. They pressed their dark secrets between the sacred pages of their personal writings.

Mary confessed to being afraid of fights, arguments and confrontations. She related that her literature circle forced her to take stands on issues through combinations of unrelenting stares and uncomfortable silences. Her passions were constantly in check and she was afraid of being wrong. Her temper violently exploded at several times during circle discussions and she completely lost control. Her question to me in one journal entry will plague me forever: "Why you have to bring all this garbage into the classroom? This was the only place I could be without being made to think about stuff like who don't like who. Why you doing this to us?"

The accusation of rape in the novel was another burning issue during circle discussions. Once again my class divided itself into separate camps—this time the dividing factor was gender.

The issue was not whether the character Luella was raped. It is obvious that she wasn't. It was the attitude of several males in the classroom:

"If she wanted Robinson that bad, he should have done it. After all, he was convicted of the crime anyway."

This viewpoint made me seethe and the girls were angrier still. It was difficult to keep my emotions from interfering in their discussions. Many times I abruptly left a circle whenever a comment I passionately disagreed with was made. The girls brought up the issue of prejudice again.

"If a girl talks or dresses a certain way, it's your belief that she's asking to be raped if she doesn't agree to a man's advances?" Nancy was livid.

A graphic description of a rape from an actual police report was brought in by a student who has a police officer in his family. Slowly and carefully, I tried to steer these boys clear of the ignorant, but generally accepted assumption, that rape is a crime of passion. I quietly reminded the class of the number of innocent children, including boys of all ages, who are violated or molested every year. Some male students defended their belief that the punishment for rape depended on who the victim was.

Discussions continued to volley back and forth. Shelly sarcastically reminded the boys that all female victims were someone's mother, sister, daughter.

"Pray it never happens to anyone you love." Her words were tainted with acid. Some boys started mumbling among themselves.

Nancy commented that Black men in the old days were done away with for looking at a White woman, and those stupid ones that went with White women were killed like dogs in the street. But any White man could do what he wanted to a Black woman.

I don't know what prompted Larry to say "Joe's mother's White."

Before I knew it Larry and Joe were exchanging blows in the middle of the classroom. I watched frozen with shock as they rolled over each other on the classroom floor. Once I could get to where the melee was taking place, I found myself incapable of separating them. Nancy appeared, as if from nowhere, and grabbed one boy from behind. They got to their feet and continued exchanging blows. Nancy somehow got one of the boys into a full Nelson while I pressed the other to the wall with all my strength.

"Go ahead," she yelled, "Kill each other off. Isn't that what we doing to ourselves? Isn't that why we have no Black brothers hanging around? How many of you got your daddy home? Black men can't discuss nothing without killing each other. No wonder we in such a sorry state."

In the quiet aftermath of a classroom left in utter disarray, long after I heard the busses pull away from the curb, I wrote in my journal: "The violence of today's society has permeated our classroom."

The novel was finished, much to my relief. I sat and pondered its ramifications on our class. I knew that the kids' feelings were still raw. Yet they seemed hesitant to let the issue go. I asked the class if there was some unresolved sentiment about the novel that we had not explored. One question that stirred up an animated discussion was: "Were the children in the novel prejudiced?"

All in the class agreed that they were not. The students observed that the kids in the book saw the town recluse more as a mystery than anyone to be shunned. They also realized that the children believed in Robinson's innocence, and they supported their father's defense of him.

"Why then" I asked, "do you think that these particular children in the novel were not prejudiced, when most of their neighbors and school friends were?" Subsequently most agreed that it had to do with the children's father and upbringing. I prompted their circle discussions with questions such as: "Have you ever been discriminated against?" "If so, when and why?" The obvious responses of color, nationality and religion surfaced. When I suggested they write whatever they did not feel comfortable talking about, other responses started to trickle in.

"Some people don't like me on their team, I'm kind slow when I run."

"Some kids say I'm ugly, my brothers do too. When they have their camera in school they don't want me in the pictures."

"Some of my friends make fun of me cause I go to L.D. classes. They think I'm dumb and don't want me on their science team."

Kathy, a child of White South American and Black Caribbean heritage had usually sat inert and despondent during class discussions about racial issues. No matter what type of peer pressure was exerted, she refused to comment and countered the group's questions with stony silence and hostile glares. She also wrote journal entries that carefully skirted the issue of racism, but concentrated frequently on injustice. It wasn't until I asked for this writing that I was to find out the source of Kathy's misery. She explained:

"My aunt had all the family over for Easter a few years ago. When it came time to take pictures of the kids with their baskets, she asked me, my brother and my sister to step out of the way. She don't like my dad 'cause he's Black. I

guess she don't like us cause we're not White. My cousins on my dad's side say he had to marry my mom. They make fun of me too. My mom's always depressed. My stupid sister is going with a White boy. I guess I don't ever feel like if I'm going to fit anywhere, and it's not my fault. It's not fair."

"I can't be part of their group," another student wrote. "Everything they do costs money. My parents can't just hand over money for the movies or the mall. So I make believe I'm not interested in their activities. They'd make fun of me if they thought I was poor. My mom and dad would kill me if I said to someone we had to count our money twice before spending it. No one in this neighborhood is supposed to be poor."

Another student of Asian and White parentage told me, "My dad acts real cool when I have my friends come over. He even drives them home. But afterwards he says, 'Why don't you have more White friends from our own neighborhood?' He's decided that I'm White, though I don't even look it."

It bothered me that this particular student checked "White" on his high school application form. I never had the courage to ask him why. Later that semester, I proofread a description of himself in a letter he wrote to a prospective mentor. In it he stated he slightly looks Asian.

I read the students' comments and saw the ugly shreds of our social fabric that are woven into their personal lives and that destroy their self-confidence. That day I saw my students as vulnerable children, carrying on their shoulders the ills of our civilized world.

The class concluded the novel with new insight and raw feelings. The general consensus was that people are taught to be prejudiced and that racism and injustice have their roots in the home. Our frank discussions and open writing, I think, helped them air some of their previously hidden feelings and helped them begin to separate their opinions from those of their parents. Some of the students told me about a commercial that they have seen on television. In it, the first scene is of bassinets with newborns of different ethnic origins. Then the camera fades into a panorama of a graveyard. The narrator at this point says: "In our world, these shouldn't be the only two places where people don't care who's next door. Stop racism now." The students continued to worry, though, that there really were few cures. To quote Kathy, "Words are cheap. Actions come too late after the hurt has been done."

I asked the children to explain if affirmative action and civil rights have helped ease the division of the races. All agreed they had to a great extent, but that there is still much to accomplish. Most did conclude, however, that they were just kids and were subjected to following rules and not making them. They had no choice but to accept the fact that their parents and the adults in their lives constantly exposed them to preconceived beliefs about racism and prejudice.

One journal entry states: "It is not easy to tell my dad not to call some of my friends Spics. He's my dad. He gets mad when I tell him not to say things like that. He's the boss. What he says goes."

I knew that I would never be able to answer their questions, or assuage their fears. Their pain was real and intense. They were hesitant to drop the issue, and I was terrified to continue. Yet I wanted this decision to be their call. I felt as if I no longer was directing the orchestra, but that the music was directing us.

The next novel I had in mind, *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry* by Mildred Taylor, was a mirror image of *To Kill A Mockingbird*. It was set in approximately the same time frame and also dealt with racial conflicts. *Roll of Thunder*, however, presents the racial conflict from the point of view of a Black child subjected to the horrors of racism in the South during the Depression, not from the point of view of White children. Taylor is a wonderful children's writer and her stories inflict reality from a historical perspective. I proceeded with the same selection process as before, only this time the students voted unanimously in favor of reading *Roll of Thunder*.

Again we started the literature circles with redefining the words prejudice and racism. This time their answers were not so hostile, not so combustible. I think the initial shock and reaction of talking about something that's always present, yet avoided, had worn off. They logically concluded, in one circle, that prejudice "is the result of preconceived judgments dictated by certain behaviors in the home and society." I was not only impressed, I was proud.

Issues of discrimination again surfaced, catapulted by certain issues in the novel. One of these issues surfaced when the Black children in the novel received used textbooks from the White schools. The textbooks were tattered and torn. One of the Black children in the story questioned why they had to learn from these old used up books. We learned that it was the accepted

practice in the South to give unusable materials to the "Nigra" schools. This fact brought on a new discussion of the "separate but equal" ruling.

We researched and examined the Brown vs. Board of Education case and dissected and discarded the separate but equal practice as a Band-Aid cure for a social malignancy. We reviewed and applauded Rosa Parks's courageous and non-violent stand against bigoted laws.

Some children asked older relatives if they remembered the "White Only" drinking fountains and rest rooms. Recollections of these times lived by grandparents and great aunts were the topic of discussion for the entire morning. Horror stories of midnight lynchings and cross burnings were told again and again. Allen pointed out that a neighbor of his great aunt's in Mississippi had been set on fire for supposedly stealing something from a White man's field. Allen's story made *Roll Of Thunder* more real, more atrocious.

One part of the novel graphically describes the physical condition of a Black man set on fire by a group of night riders, a posse of Klan members, because he had allegedly looked at a White woman with a "degree of undisguised lust." The students compared this incident with Tom Robinson's trial in *To Kill A Mockingbird*. The circumstances were similar, the outcomes were similar, but as Allen put it, "Robinson had a White lawyer protecting him. It did nothing but buy him some time. This guy here had nothing but his words, and a Black man's word ain't worth nothing."

Nancy continued, "He was set on fire to set an example and make others afraid. I'm sure that if they wanted him dead they would have lynched him in the woods. They needed to send a message to the other Black folk that this could also happen to you. They had to spread fear, to intimidate."

All my students were disturbed by the fact that the Black children in the novel were expected to walk miles each day to school, while they were passed daily by a bus full of White kids going in the same direction. Their daily walks to school included being the object of humiliation as the White bus driver tried to run the children off the road and into muddy embankments.

At this point I asked the students to try to identify the improvements that they felt have occurred in public education since that time. I asked them how they would try to insure that all children receive a similarly effective public education. The majority of their answers revolved around the need for the improvement of school facilities and the communities that surround them.

Bussing and integration, however, were the issues that reopened the proverbial can of worms. I was once again faced with an explosive issue with my classroom of bussed and neighborhood kids.

"Now minorities can get into colleges and jobs first just because of what they are." Shelly spoke without malice. The bussed students, I detected, took offense at her statement.

"And if they are the token, they better watch their back, and they got to work twice as hard as their White peers." Nancy's words were spat out like rounds from a machine gun. Their target was obvious. Shelly seemed to gear up for another confrontation.

"Whites are just trying to play catch up for all the years of inequality. They owe us." Kathy reasoned out loud, before Shelly could answer.

Larry commented next, "Who's kidding who? Yeah so we come to this nice clean school in a White neighborhood. Who are the ones standing on a street corner in the early morning, in the rain and the snow and in the cold to catch the bus while most of the kids from around here are still in bed? You ever heard of a White kid being bussed to our neighborhood? The Whites gave us rides to school all right, away from our own. Every time we try to get a piece of what the Whites got, it backfires on us. They fix it so we are pissed and then they can say, 'Hey, ain't this what you wanted?' We always gonna be wrong, no matter what we get."

All the bussed kids nodded their heads in agreement with Larry's comment. Not one of them had been spared the frustration of waiting for late busses during inclement weather.

Allen spoke slowly, deliberately, "Yeah we come here and see all the stuff our neighborhood ain't. It's just like the textbooks that the Black kids got in the book. Our neighborhood's like that. We get the leftovers, the areas no one else wants."

I asked the group, "Do you feel that the environment here or the environment of your home school is more comfortable for you?" I wanted them to be specific and I wanted substantiated answers. I did not want the class discussion to turn into an "Oh I'm so grateful I'm here" testimony. I asked the class to name specific examples of the pros and cons of bussing, on the students being bussed and on the schools receiving them. As I expected, the cons outweighed the pros. Some of the most indisputable reasons were:

"All our neighborhood friends are scattered all over. We all go to different receiving schools. The kids from here stay together. They grow together."

"I leave this place at 3:15, so I guess this place is integrated from 9:00 to 3:15, Monday to Friday, September to June, excluding all holidays."

"If the neighborhood kids want to stay for the after school programs and social center, they just walk back to school. If we want to stay we need an act of Congress, a way to get home after dark, a White family that will take us home with them until the activities start and three notes from our momma. It ain't worth all that."

"It is fine if one of the neighborhood kids learns to speak Spanish. Wow how smart, how intelligent! But we're expected to learn English. Our Spanish ain't so smart. If we don't learn to speak like them, we're dumb."

One of the neighborhood kids asked if the bussed kids felt just a little safer here, rather than in their neighborhood schools.

"Sure, but you better run like hell when those busses let you off in front of the home school. Then we got to walk the rest of the way to our house. Sometimes the gangs are there waiting for us to beat us up. At times it's like we're delivered right to them. It ain't all the time but it happens often enough."

The issues they mentioned as pros were touching:

"I've made some good friends."

"I see the kind of neighborhood I want my kids to grow in."

"I met Mrs. Gemmati."

"We do stuff like this—reading novels that kids in other schools don't do. We kinda have a say in things here."

One neighborhood student spoke up. "We don't have it all so great here. Some of the kids from this neighborhood that go to private schools won't talk to us because we talk to you."

Another neighborhood kid continued. "Yeah, they chase us and throw rocks at us, and if we are caught around their house, they try to beat us up because we go to this school. Because there's minorities at this school."

"The people around here don't care how good you are or what you do, and it ain't only the kids, they'd hate Mrs. Gemmati too because she's Puerto Rican."

The moment this was said, a hush permeated the classroom. All eyes turned toward me. I tried to remain unfazed but I felt yanked out of my

neutral zone. I now was categorized, labeled, seen differently. I was no longer just the teacher. I was now one of the 'sides' I so desperately tried to stay out of. I hoped that this was the wedge I needed to help them realize that they need to look at a person's qualities first and foremost.

I tried to ask for reasons for their persecution other than being members of our school. None were offered. The bussed kids promised to help the neighborhood kids "show these bigots a lesson." I saw a subtle change in the kids toward the end of that particular discussion and at the end of this novel. I saw them bond, if only temporarily, against a common enemy, only to scatter once more to the specified territories my research had delineated.

The theme of inequality again was analyzed and cast as a result of racial prejudice. They discussed the fact that in *Roll of Thunder*, Cassie's family was targeted more than others because they had the distinction of being landowners. The students arrived at the conclusion that the Whites were uncomfortable with Blacks who had the potential for material equality—especially as landowners. Ultimately, the students felt torn at the end of the book. They realized that Cassie's father had deliberately set his crop on fire to distract and ultimately stop the lynching of a neighbor's son. They knew that this crop was the only thing the family counted on to pay the taxes on their land. The students concluded that the family would either have to sell part of their land or lose it outright. They also knew that the boy who was saved from the lynching would now stand trial for the murder of two White store keepers and be convicted because of the improbability of a fair trial due to his color.

The children had a hard time dealing with the author's decision at this juncture. They compared the ending of *To Kill A Mockingbird* to this one, and agreed that it was possible in *Roll of Thunder* for the Black family to keep the land their White neighbors so desperately wanted. "Their decision was a poor one," most maintained. "The kid couldn't be saved anyhow. What was the point?"

"Cassie's dad was faced with choosing between his beliefs and convictions, and the land that had been his since birth. He chose what he believed in," I announced quietly.

"Is that what you want from us Mrs. Gemmati?"

"What's that?" I asked Shelly.

"You know, to let go of the stuff we see at home and make up our own minds about prejudice?"

Shelly's assumption took me by surprise. I literally had no idea that this was what I had unknowingly conveyed. I smiled at this group of students that I unconditionally loved.

"No," I responded. "What I want is not the issue. It's what you feel is right that's important. If I ask you to follow my convictions, I am doing no better than the person who tells you to believe that all Blacks are bad, that all Whites are racists or that all Hispanics are ignorant and loud. I strongly believe that the way to end prejudice is to stop taking another's judgment as your own. Don't let someone else prejudge for you."

The abrupt ending to the novel left them wanting answers and solutions to the problems we discussed. The novel tied no loose ends.

I attempted to explain that society's ills nowadays were the same yet different. One of the kids brought up the case of the Rodney King beating, and the subsequent beating of the truck driver during the ensuing riots in Los Angeles. Another student brought up the Jeffrey Dahmer case. All his victims were minorities.

"I wonder if the police would have returned that last Asian boy to Dahmer if the kid was White and Dahmer was the minority." Larry's comment took everyone by surprise.

An animated discussion on many "what ifs" followed. I sat back and listened. Their logic was, I thought, beyond their years.

My eighth graders have read their novels. The numerous tapes, papers, and journals they've created in the process have changed our class forever. These items declare a silent tribute to the changes we've seen happen before our eyes.

Our feelings are still somewhat coarse, our nerves still exposed. These kids no longer tiptoe around issues of race. In many cases, the issue of race became a negative point of persuasion, as in the following exchange between two students in my class. The following tone of conversation has now become quite common among them.

"Let me have a pen."

"Don't have another one."

"You won't let me have one 'cause I'm White, you think I should have my own pen. If I were Black you'd lend me one. You're a racist."

"I don't care what color you are, girlfriend, I ain't got another pen."

"Why," I asked Nancy's literature circle a few days later, "haven't you ever discussed how these racial differences bothered you before?"

"They always were there Mrs. Gemmati," she answered, "we just never acted on what we thought."

"Explain."

"It's like how do you act in church? Or in a library? Or when your mamma has company over? You don't act the same as when someone's there watching you, or when you're home and your mamma ain't there."

I knew exactly what she meant. I've become very sensitive about bringing up issues in class that could eventually lead to further rifts between what I once thought was a close-knit group of kids. Ignorance is bliss and safe, but can I truly affect the lives of my students by reciting pre-rehearsed lines on a make-believe stage? Do I want to defer these discussions of race and prejudice to dark alleys which are constantly punctuated by the sound of gunfire? Do I let the neighborhood children continue to be steeped in the thick smog of superiority that is so choking and prevalent? It was a thick armor of racism that my students had been dressed in during their years of upbringing, one that was difficult to dent. I did find clues, hints maybe, that the confusion, frustration and the ordeal of adolescence was bleeding into another issue—the questioning of their parents' beliefs about different nationalities, races, and religion. As the year progressed, they wrote in their journals:

"I don't know how long he's (Dad's) felt that way [about others], but lots of things he grew up with ain't even around anymore. The movies ain't a dollar, and damn ain't considered a swear word."

"So what if I bring home someone who isn't Black. If that person loves me and respects me and doesn't do me wrong, why should I refuse him for a Brother who sells on the corner and is a player?"

"Why does she (Mom) call them rag heads? God that pisses me off. How would she of felt if her Jewish grandfather married another Jew instead of her grandma? She isn't the puritanical Protestant she acts on Sunday all the rest of the week."

"I don't care if my dad says we have to stick to our own. If someone doesn't try to move into more decent places and show other people we ain't the loud and dirty Spics they say we are, how are they going to know

different? Someone has to cross over to other neighborhoods and show that we want the same things they do."

The year was ending and I still did not sense a feeling of closure with my students on these issues of prejudice. Their attitudes were shifting but their sense of one another was still fragile. I sensed that the children felt this way too.

We were slated to go on the eighth-grade school trip to Washington and after our difficult year, the trip began to seem more of a necessity than an option. A few days away from school, parents, teachers, books and students in other grades seemed like the perfect cure for what felt like a nagging cough. I figured if we didn't bond after being on a bus for umpteen hours and sharing sleeping quarters, there would be no hope.

Interestingly, the tension seemed to dissipate the further we got from Chicago. As some kids dozed off, others left their groups to form new groups with those who remained awake. We talked about everything and nothing. The boundaries that identified us as people from specific places and with distinct roles got fuzzier and fuzzier. By the time we reached Philadelphia, we seemed to be one group of people, from Chicago, eager to spend uncurfewed time with one another. We cared about each other's luggage, comfort, and likes. We cared.

The tours of Washington were important, yes, and of course educational. But what I was looking at was more than the monuments that mark our country's growth. I was seeing in my students the behavior that is displayed when children are allowed to follow their basic friendly instincts—without worrying about approval or criticisms of who they speak to or who they hang around with.

On the last night before our long bus ride back to Chicago, my student teacher came banging on my door late at night. She was on the verge of hysteria, and it was a good long minute before she could inform me that a group of the kids had not returned to their rooms yet. She had fallen asleep and some of the kids had sneaked out. Just as I was about to dial the hotel security, Melissa ran into my room yelling that Nancy wouldn't answer the door, no matter how hard she banged on it. I dropped the phone and hurried down the hall. I yelled, I screamed, I kicked, but no one answered the door. I had my student teacher run down to the lobby to get a master key. I shuddered as the security guard opened the door.

The scene inside the room was incredible. Pop cans and popcorn were scattered everywhere, the T.V. was blaring, and about 15 of my students were asleep fully clothed, minus shoes which piled up in a corner, fermenting. The kids were in an array of sleeping positions. Multicolored legs and arms were tangled everywhere. Nancy slowly opened her eyes and saw Shelly, Larry, Joe, and Maria sleeping on the same bed she had happened to crash in. Slowly they started to waken. They looked around and seemed surprised to find themselves in such a noisy, overcrowded room, with their teacher and a security guard standing in the doorway. I started laughing. Freddy took one look at my faded Garfield sleeping shirt, my one sockless foot and tangle of hair and he started laughing. Pretty soon everyone was giggling at someone's sock, pointing at whomever with their thumb in the mouth, the drool coming from a half-open mouth, the weird look of half closed eyes or disheveled hair.

The security guard looked at us as if we were truly nuts. "These your kids Miss?"

"Yep," I answered. "Each and every one of them."

I would be lying to myself if I pretended to be the teacher I was before I initiated this project. If anything, this research has taught me that hard talk on candid issues can take place within the safety of classroom walls. I know that a society that is free of prejudice is many, many years away, but it's something I hope to keep striving for—even if it's only in this pond of life that comprises my classroom.

NATIONAL CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WRITING

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